

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4048

INFO AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMCONSUL BELFAST

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 13045

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK(NI)

SUBJECT: NORTHERN IRELAND: HMG VIEWS OF CURRENT SITUATION

SUMMARY - NIO UNDERSECRETARY REVIEWED CURRENT SITUATION IN NI, STRESSING NEED TO SEE DEVELOPMENTS IN CONTEXT OF PAST FIVE YEARS AND MAKING FOLLOWING KEY POINTS: ALTHOUGH LEVEL OF VIOLENCE HAS INCREASED DRAMATICALLY IN PAST MONTH, IT HAS STILL BEEN FAR LOWER THAN IN PREVIOUS YEARS; PROVISIONAL IRA CEASEFIRE WILL PROBABLY HOLD FOR AT LEAST TWO MORE MONTHS; CONFIDENTIAL MEETINGS BETWEEN PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC POLITICAL LEADERS WERE SLOW GETTING OFF MARK BECAUSE NEITHER SIDE HAD DONE ITS HOMEWORK; AND CHANCES FOR SUCCESSFUL CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, WHILE LESS THAN EVEN, REMAIN REASONABLY GOOD IN NI CONTEXT. ALTHOUGH NIO IS CLEARLY DISTURBED BY RECENT EVENTS, WE PERCEIVE NO INDICATIONS THAT WILSON GOVERNMENT IS SERIOUSLY REAPPRAISING ITS CURRENT STRATEGY OF TRYING TO FORCE ULSTER POLITICAL LEADERSHIP TO DEVISE SOLUTION TO SECTARIAN DEADLOCK, WHILE PHASING OUT DETENTION. UPWARD TREND IN LEVEL OF VIOLENCE, OF COURSE, INTENSIFIES PRESSURES FOR ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES.

ANNUAL LABOR PARTY CONFERENCE (SEPTEMBER 29-OCTOBER 3) IS EXPECTED TO DEBATE NI QUESTION, ADDING FURTHER

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THE IMPETUS FOR POLICY RECONSIDERATION. FUNDAMENTAL

DIFFICULTY, HOWEVER, IS THAT ALL OTHER SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES ARE MANIFESTLY LESS SATISFACTORY THAN CURRENT POLICY. END SUMMARY.

1. NI OFFICE UNDERSECRETARY DENIS TREVELYAN AUGUST 20 REVIEWED RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND THE OUTLOOK IN NI FOR EMBOFF. NOTING, AS IS HIS PRACTICE, THAT EVENTS IN NI MUST BE SEEN IN CONTEXT OF PAST FIVE YEARS, TREVELYAN OBSERVED THAT TRENDS HAVE BEEN DISTURBING BUT NOT DISHEARTENING. INCREASED LEVEL OF VIOLENCE, HE SAID, WAS FUNCTION OF INCREASED IRISH REPUBLICAN SOCIALIST PARTY (IRSP) AND PROTESTANT PARAMILITARY ACTIVITY AND THE "MARCHING SEASON" (JULY-AUGUST ARE TRADITIONALLY MONTHS IN WHICH BOTH COMMUNITIES STAGE PROVOCATIVE DEMONSTRATIONS). MEDIA HAVE ALSO TENDED TO SENSATIONALIZE EVENTS -- E.G., ANTI-INTERNMENT MARCHES WHICH TRIGGERED LOCALIZED DISTURBANCES WERE GIVEN HEAVY COVERAGE, DESPITE TOTAL TURNOUT OF LESS THAN 300 HUNDRED MARCHERS, AS COMPARED WITH SEVERAL THOUSAND IN PRIOR YEARS. LEVEL OF VIOLENCE IN THIS PERIOD HAS BEEN WITHIN LIMITS ANTICIPATED BY HMG, AND SUBSTANTIALLY LOWER THAN WORST ESTIMATES. STATISTICS ON DEATHS, WOUNDINGS, BOMBING AND SHOOTING INCIDENTS ARE STILL MARKEDLY BELOW PRIOR YEARS. HMG INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES INDICATE PROVISIONAL IRA IS STILL COMMITTED TO MAINTAINING CEASEFIRE, ALTHOUGH IT LOST CONTROL OF ITS "SECOND BATTALION" BRIEFLY FOLLOWING ANTI-INTERNMENT MARCHES. CURRENT ASSESSMENT, HE SAID, IS THAT CEASEFIRE WILL LAST FOR AT LEAST TO MORE MONTHS. TREVELYAN ILLUSTRATED PROBLEM FACING SECURITY FORCES BY CITING BRUTAL KILLING BY CATHOLICS OF PROTESTANT WORKER HELPING TO REPAIR BOMB DAMAGE NEAR IRA INCIDENT CENTER (HMG BELIEVES IRA BOMB EXPLODED PREMATURELY). NOTWITHSTANDING STRONG CONDEMNATION THIS ACT BY CATHOLIC CHURCH AND COMMUNITY LEADERS, NO ONE WILL REVEAL IDENTITY OF KILLERS, EVEN THOUGH SLAYING OCCURRED IN STREET IN FRONT OF OVER ONE HUNDRED (CATHOLIC) BYSTANDERS.

2. HMG CONTINUES TO BELIEVE THERE IS GOOD, ALBEIT LESS THAN EVEN, CHANCE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION WILL AVOID DEADLOCK AND PRODUCE AT LEAST LIMITED AGREEMENT. ITS
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AUGUST 11 REOPENING WAS POSTPONED TO PERMIT CONFIDENTIAL TALKS BETWEEN LEADERS OF UUUC AND SDLP. THESE MEETINGS WERE AGREED UPON BEFORE THE RECESS AND SUPPOSED TO TAKE PLACE DURING HOLIDAY PERIOD (BELFAST 240), BUT NEITHER SIDE MADE EFFORT TO MEET WITH THE OTHER. UPON THEIR RETURN FROM HOLIDAYS, STAFF OF CONVENTION CHAIRMAN, SIR ROBERT LOWRY, TOOK INITIATIVE TO BRING TWO SIDES TOGETHER, AND MEETINGS GOT UNDERWAY. PROGRESS, HOWEVER,

IS VERY SLOW, AS NEITHER SIDE HAD DONE ITS HOMEWORK.
THIS SITUATION, TREVELYAN SUGGESTED, POINTED UP POLITICAL
NAIVETE AND LACK OF FOLLOW-THROUGH ENDEMIC AMONG NI PO-
LITICIANS. HE ALSO REPORTED LOWRY IS PREPARED TO MEDIATE

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SHOULD PRIVATE TALKS APPEAR TO BE GETTING IN TROUBLE,
AND THAT SECRETARY REES WOULD PROBABLY INTERVENE IN LOW-
KEY WAY SHOULD IT APPEAR HIS INTERVENTION WOULD BE HELP-
FUL. REGARDING POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND PERSONALITIES,
TREVELYAN SAID SDLP APPEARS TO HAVE TACITLY DROPPED ITS
INSISTENCE ON AN "IRISH DIMENSION" AND SOFTENED ITS PO-
SITION ON POWER SHARING, WHILE UUUC IS PRIVATELY SHOWING
SIGNS OF FLEXIBILITY. BOTH SDLP AND UUUC LEADER HARRY
WEST, ACCORDING TO TREVELYAN, ARE CONSCIOUS OF OVER-
RIDING POLITICAL NEED TO FIND ACCEPTABLE ACCOMMODATION.
IAN PAISLEY, HE THOUGHT, IS LYING LOW, WAITING TO SEE HOW
EVENTS UNFOLD. HE CHARACTERIZED PAISLEY AS OPPORTUNIST
WHO WOULD NOT HESITATE TO PROVOKE COLLAPSE OF CONVENTION
IF HE WOULD STAND TO GAIN. WILLIAM CRAIG, WHO TREVELYAN
JUDGED TO BE ENIGMA, PERHAPS HOLDS KEY TO ULSTER'S PO-
LITICAL FUTURE. CRAIG'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS HAVE EVIDENCED

WILLINGNESS TO COMPROMISE, BUT HIS CLOSE TIES WITH PARAMILITARY GROUPS MEAN HIS POWER IS LESS DEPENDENT ON NORMAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS THAN IS THAT OF OTHER NI POLITICIANS. HE IS, ACCORDINGLY, THE MOST DANGEROUS OF THE PROTESTANT LEADERS. ENOCH POWELL, ACCORDING TO TREVELYAN, IS NO LONGER A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN NI POLITICS. THE
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ALLIANCE PARTY IS NOT PLAYING A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE CONVENTION, BUT IS BEING WOODED BY BOTH CAMPS.

3. DISCUSSING HMG'S NI POLICY, TREVELYAN SAID THAT NIO HAS NOT SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED ALTERING CURRENT STRATEGY WHICH SEEKS TO FORCE ULSTER POLITICAL LEADERS TO DEVISE THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS TO THE SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE SECTARIAN AND POLITICAL DIVISIONS, WHILE PHASING OUT DETENTION, MAINTAINING CEASEFIRE AND EMPHASISING NORMAL LAW ENFORCEMENT PRACTICES (INVESTIGATION, ARREST AND TRIAL). TACTICAL ADJUSTMENTS, OF COURSE, WILL BE CONTINGENT ON DEVELOPMENTS. HMG COMMITMENT TO POWER-SHARING REMAINS FIRM, BUT HE IMPLIED THAT AS PRACTICAL MATTER THE GOVERNMENT (AND PRESUMABLY PARLIAMENT) WOULD ACCEPT ANYTHING THAT WAS AGREEABLE TO THE SDLP. HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THIS POLICY CONTAINED A HIGH DEGREE OF SECURITY AND POLITICAL RISK, BUT NOTED THAT PREVIOUS BRITISH EFFORTS TO IMPOSE SOLUTIONS HAD NOT PRODUCED A VIABLE RESULT AND MAY EVEN HAVE EXACERBATED SECTARIAN DIFFERENCES.

4. COMMENT: HMG'S VIEW THAT ULTIMATE POLITICAL SOLUTION IN NI, ASSUMING THERE IS ONE, MUST BE DEVELOPED BY THE PEOPLE OF ULSTER STRIKES US AS VALID. WE WOULD ALSO AGREE THAT ATTEMPTS BY OUTSIDERS, WHETHER BRITISH OR IRISH, TO FORMULATE SOLUTIONS HAVE BEEN NOTABLE FOR THEIR LACK OF SUCCESS. NEVERTHELESS, THE CURRENT SITUATION, WITH ITS APPARENTLY ESCALATING LEVEL OF VIOLENCE, PLACES INCREASING PRESSURE ON HMG TO TAKE DECISIVE ACTION -- REVERSE DETENTION POLICY, INSTITUTE DRACONIAN SECURITY MEASURES, DICTATE POLITICAL TERMS TO THE MAJORITY PROTESTANT COMMUNITY AND WITHDRAW TROOPS ARE AMONG THE MEASURES URGED BY VARIOUS FACTIONS AND GROUPS.

THE SEPTEMBER 30-OCTOBER 3

LABOR PARTY CONFERENCE, MOREOVER, WILL PROVIDE A FORUM FOR PARTY DISSIDENTS TO ATTACK THE GOVERNMENT'S NI POLICY, DEMANDING WITHDRAWAL OF BRITISH TROOPS. WHILE WE EXPECT CONFERENCE SUPPORT FOR WITHDRAWAL MAY INCREASE OVER LAST YEAR, THERE IS LITTLE POSSIBILITY THAT A RESOLUTION TO THIS EFFECT WILL BE PASSED. THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM, HOWEVER, IS THAT ALL OF THE SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES, SAVE WITHDRAWAL, HAVE BEEN TRIED AND
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FOUND SERIOUSLY WANTING, WHILE WITHDRAWAL ITSELF WOULD
BE ADMISSION OF POLITICAL BANKRUPTCY WHICH WOULD ALMOST
CERTAINLY TRIGGER CIVIL WAR IN NI AND COULD WELL BRING
DOWN THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT.

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